



Address at Morning Prayers, Memorial Church, Harvard University, 1989.

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Morning Prayers April 6, 1989

Opening hymn: no. 34 in Harvard Hymnal

Responsive reading: Psalm 139

Bible text: Daniel 5.1-7

Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin: the writing of those nine syllables upon a wall has given rise to many times nine interpretations. Today I wish to consider not these words nor even interpretations of these words, but instead the very notions of good and bad interpretation.

Why does this topic merit discussion here, when there are other seemingly more appropriate edifices within a stone's throw—not to mention other seemingly more appropriate topics for within these hallowed precincts?

I would be disingenuous to deny the special relevance of the topic to me personally, since I make my profession of interpreting literature. But I like to think that it is important for all of us to consider acts of interpretation—and acts interpreted—and texts interpreted, because interpretation is as peculiar and essential to human beings as the right to name the animals and is as much a reenactment of creation.

Let me return to the Book of Daniel, which like so much of the Bible is deeply concerned with acts of interpretation. In the first few chapters of the Book Nebuchadnezzar asks the prophet to interpret dreams. Through the generous wisdom of God, Daniel produces supernaturally insightful interpretations that save not only his own life, but the well-being of his entire people.

Yet Daniel's most memorable interpretation comes after he has unraveled Nebuchadnezzar's dreams. This interpretation is provoked by a moment both extraordinarily dreamlike and extraordinarily concrete: picture the sordid gaiety of Belshazzar's banquet, the desecrated vessels filled with wine and the concubines drunken, when a detached hand appears out of nowhere and writes on a wall those fateful words, mene mene tekel upharsin.

To Belshazzar the detached hand is deceptive, not like a hand stamped in red upon an envelope to indicate that you licked one stamp too few. To Belshazzar the detached hand is horrifying, just like the hands that crawl through old horror films. Most of all, to Belshazzar the detached hand is monstrous, not like the disembodied head and smile of Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat. But to Daniel the hand that writes on the wall is a helping hand, because the grace of God enables him to interpret successfully what the hand of God has written.

Perhaps divine assistance is needed to make an interpretation good and to prevent it from becoming bad. To express the dark sides of interpretation, we speak of "misinterpretation" and

“overinterpretation,” forgetting that the word “interpretation” is in itself tainted etymologically. Its closest relative in English is the word “pornography,” the connection between the two being that they both indicate trafficking or selling. The bright side of interpretation is Daniel’s sort, what could be termed “exegesis”: and exegesis means in Greek to lead out or to show the way out.

Although the liberal arts are no longer the handmaidens of theology, although religious books were long ago cast from the top floor of Widener Library to the lowest circle of Pusey, all of us should retain a sense of wonderment about the act of interpretation and a concern that our interpretations not simply sell our ideas, but rather help to lead onward and upward.

Closing Hymn: no. 154 in Harvard Hymnal